

NOTES

Poetic Realism in Olivier's *Hamlet*¹

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Before Olivier became a filmmaker, movies like the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* and *As You Like It* kept Shakespeare on the shelf—labelled “box-office poison.” Yet it is estimated that more people all over the world saw *Henry V* in its first year after release than had seen it in the almost four centuries since Shakespeare wrote it.² *Hamlet*, for its part, had the somewhat dubious distinction of winning five Academy Awards including the 1948 Oscar for Best Picture of the Year. Even now, it remains the only positive experience many average moviegoers I have spoken with report they have ever had with Shakespeare. What is the source of the unmistakable effect Olivier's *Hamlet* has had for over thirty years on a larger and more varied audience than even Shakespeare could have imagined?

In this article, I propose to demonstrate that the impact of Olivier's *Hamlet* derives not only from the charismatic appeal of the actor or the titillations of the Freudian interpretation, but from the film medium itself—the particular cinematic devices Olivier chose to use to convey certain of his ideas about the play. Then I think it will become clear that while undeniably a commercial and popular success, this film, achieving its effect by cinematic means, is an artistic one as well.

Though very much a man of the theatre, Olivier had always yearned for his “muse of fire.” In 1940, for example, he and Vivien Leigh lost their life's savings on an ill-fated Broadway production of *Romeo and Juliet* that featured a revolving stage. What they were apparently seeking was the flexibility of time and space that is suggested by Shakespeare's play and also happens to be perhaps the major element that distinguishes film from theatre. If Olivier regarded the film as a way to overcome the limitations of

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¹*Hamlet* (1948) 152 minutes. A.J. Arthur Rank Enterprises. A Two-Cities Film under the Management of Filippo del Giudice. Produced and Directed by Laurence Olivier. Designer, Roger Furse; cinematographer, Desmond Dickinson; text editor, Alan Dent; editor, Helga Cranston; music, William Walton.

²See Filippo del Giudice, “They Forget the Public Also Had Intelligence,” *Films and Filming*, (5 February 1959), 12 and 32; and Arthur Knight, “The Reluctant Audience,” *Sight and Sound*, 22 (April-June 1953), 191-92.

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phor for Hamlet's labyrinthine mind. Yet this is cinematic imagery, for details like the rosemary on Hamlet's chair would not even be visible without the camera. Seen through its lens, even the huge, cavernous castle with its conveniently movable walls and non-existent ceilings go beyond staginess into a whole other realm. The playing-card costumes are straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the voice-over illustrations—the murder, the drowning of Ophelia, Hamlet's encounter with the pirates, and his visit to Ophelia's closet—are very much like chapters in a fairy tale. Perhaps that is why they rarely seem to trouble the younger spectators, who are perhaps more comfortable with the fantasy aspects of the film than those of us a bit farther removed from the whimsical world of childhood.

The cinematography cleverly reinforces this “Once-upon-a-time” atmosphere, setting the tone immediately by conjuring up a flashforward of Hamlet's funeral. Ophelia doesn't walk down the corridor to collect the book from her father; rather, a disembodied hand beckons and she materializes with a dissolve, seeming to float through the arches toward the camera. Hamlet doesn't barge into Ophelia's closet while she's sewing; instead, he appears as a tiny figure on the left of the screen in a complicated series of superimpositions over a huge close-up of her face, then proceeds into a slow mime routine. It is not only the Ghost in Olivier's *Hamlet* who comes “in such a questionable shape.” One half expects these inhabitants of Elsinore to be able to walk through mirrors, like the characters in Cocteau's *Orphée*.

Hamlet, in fact, contains an almost suspicious number of dissolves—even for a film made before the direct cut became “fashionable.” Some indicate simple passages of time. Others, like the one from the Queen's bed to Claudius swigging down his wine, make meaningful transitions. But none is gratuitously “artsy.” Nor have I found any that seem to me grossly misplaced, as has been suggested.⁹ Even the somewhat controversial dissolve between Hamlet's first soliloquy and Laertes' parting advice to his sister does in fact suggest a definite passage of time—enough for Laertes to have his “necessaries embark'd.” It is hardly needed to mask the match between two sets, as has been charged, since the camera is clearly able to negotiate the very same distance without a break later when it follows Ophelia shortly before her death.

Moreover, the dissolves and superimpositions have another larger purpose. They are very much responsible, along with the sets and costumes, for the story-book quality which, as in *Henry V*, Olivier felt was a more suitable backdrop for a film with dialogue in Elizabethan verse than a starkly realistic one would have been. As his text editor, Alan Dent, explains, they were trying to avoid a jarring effect that would lead the novice to the inevitable question, “If this is a real castle, why is everyone talking so funny?”¹⁰

⁹See Bernice W. Kliman, “Olivier's *Hamlet*: A Film-Infused Play,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 5.4 (Fall 1977), 311 and 314.

¹⁰See Alan Dent, ed., *Hamlet: The Film and the Play* (London: World Film Pub., 1948), unpag.

the stage, however, it was only, according to André Bazin, as “a complimentary form of theatre.” In Bazin's view, both Olivier and his supposed rival Orson Welles saw in cinema “the chance to produce theatre precisely as they feel and see it.”¹¹ If Bazin is on the right track, Olivier's film approach to Shakespeare, as evidenced by *Hamlet*, should not be terribly different from his stage approach. Such is in fact the case.

Olivier's initial reaction to the project was a “terror,” he says, of putting “huge sections of the world public off Shakespeare”¹² with material that seemed too erudite. He correctly judged that a film audience, unlike a theatre audience, would be made up largely of the “young and uninitiated.”¹³ Thus he made many cuts, transpositions, and other changes in *Hamlet*¹⁴ that were criticized by some as oversimplifications. But even on the stage, his first impulse seems to be to cut things down to size. “I always try to reassure the audience,” he said while performing in *Othello*, “that they are not going to see some grotesque outsized dimension of something they can't understand or sympathize with.”¹⁵

This attitude meant that Olivier found himself branded early on as “realistic,” while his other so-called “rival,” John Gielgud, was said to be more “lyrical” or “poetic.”¹⁶ Yet is Olivier's *Othello*, even with all its attention to detail in make-up, diction, and mannerism, realistic? If this is realism, it is realism with poetic license. In fact, I submit that Olivier's traditional treatment of Shakespeare, be it on stage or on film, is a special mixture of poetry and realism, poetic realism if you will, which can find its truest expression only in films like *Hamlet*.

Many aspects of *Hamlet* can be seen as poetic. Aside from the beautiful delivery of Shakespeare's verse by almost every member of the cast, the film has more than its share of symbolism and imagery. There are, for example, the none too subtle Freudian touches like the recurring shots of the cannons and the Queen's bed. The castle itself was designed as a meta-

¹¹André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* I (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1970), p. 124.

¹²Laurence Olivier, “A. Chekhov and W. Shakespeare,” *The American Film Theatre Cinebill*: “Three Sisters”, 1.6 (1973), unpag.

¹³Olivier and Dent actually cut the play by about half, eliminating whole characters and scenes rather than individual lines to avoid being left with nothing but loose ends. Gone are Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Fortinbras, Cornelius, Voltimand, the Second Gravedigger, the Norwegian Captain, and the English Ambassadors along with many of the scenes in which they appear. Also scrapped were the “Rogue and Peasant Slave” and “How All Occasions Do Inform Against Me” soliloquies. Notable among the transpositions is the reversal in running order of the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy and the Nunnery Scene. Changes were made with an eye to timing, continuity, clarity, length, and consistency, as well as simplification, and the result defined as an “essay in *Hamlet*” rather than a fully developed film version of the play. See Laurence Olivier, “An Essay in *Hamlet*,” *The Film “Hamlet”: A Record of Its Production*, ed. Brenda Cross (London: The Saturn Press, 1948), pp. 11-15.

¹⁴Op. cit.

¹⁵Quoted in Richard Meryman, “The Great Sir Laurence,” *Life*, 1 May 1964, p. 118.

¹⁶The tradition apparently began when the two actors alternated in the roles of Romeo and Mercutio for Gielgud's 1935 production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

As for those more familiar with the play, they can always ponder the rather intriguing implications of Olivier's presentation of Elsinore as a kind of Never-Never Land complete with pirates, and Hamlet as its resident Peter Pan.¹⁷ There's something for everybody in Olivier's *Hamlet*.

But by far the most important single factor contributing to the effect of Olivier's *Hamlet* is the fact that virtually the entire film is shot in depth, an expensive and often troublesome process that was obviously not undertaken without very good reason. Shooting in depth involves using a wide-angle lens with a very small aperture, and results in objects as far away as 150 feet in the background appearing as sharply in focus as those in the foreground. This is how beautiful scenes like the one in which Hamlet and Ophelia gaze at each other through a seemingly endless series of arches, the one Olivier calls “the longest distance love-scene on record,”¹⁸ were shot. Unfortunately, this clarity may also extend to creases in the costumes, seams in the sets, or superfluous shadows. Furthermore, since deep focus requires sixteen times the normal amount of light required for regular black and white photography,¹⁹ Olivier and company sometimes found the buzzing from high-intensity lamps making unscheduled appearance on the soundtrack.

Although many films contain scenes in depth, only a handful, among them *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), use it consistently. Olivier and his cinematographer Desmond Dickinson claim that they chose the technique because it reduces the number of distracting cuts by making it possible to film long sequences with moving actors and/or camera without losing the focus. This preserves the unity of time and space they felt was necessary to give the audience a secure feeling of continuity.¹⁴ In effect, what was done with cuts and transpositions to clarify the characters' motivations and smooth out the rhythm of the text is thus reinforced by the cinematography. But the decision to shoot in depth has far more interesting ramifications.

It is André Bazin again who provides us with insights into the effects of deep focus photography. While analyzing the films of Jean Renoir in *What is Cinema?*,¹⁵ he traces the technique back to the German Expressionists and proclaims it a legitimate and sometimes preferable alternative to the

¹⁷There is a great deal of evidence in the film to support the theory that Hamlet, caught in the midst of an adolescent crisis precipitated by an Oedipus complex, hesitates to kill Claudius because he subconsciously knows that he is not ready to replace his uncle as King of Denmark. Whether or not Olivier personally subscribes to such an interpretation is difficult to say. He has consistently refused to comment on such matters at any length, preferring to let his work speak for itself. In any case, to discuss this “Peter Pan Theory of *Hamlet*” any further would require a whole other article.

¹⁸Cross, p. 12.

¹⁹It is interesting that for *Richard III*, Olivier chose VistaVision, a rather unusual color process that also aims at a deep focus effect.

¹⁴See Olivier and Dickinson in Cross, pp. 11-15 and 29-35 respectively.

¹⁵Bazin, pp. 23-40.